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Art by intention and art by appropriation: "Authenticity," Western encounters, and ethics of collection and display of African art

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Art by Intention and Art by Appropriation: "Authenticity," Western Encounters, and Ethics of Collection and Display of African Art

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This research project surveys the overlap of Western notions of authenticity, encounters with Africa, and the ethics of collecting and displaying of African art objects. First, I define the issues surrounding definitions of authenticity; second, I lay out the historical background of Western interaction with West Africa and modern demand for African art objects; third I discuss the issues authenticity and corresponding ethics of display; finally, I explain how this information applies to two objects from the UNI Museum collection. In this thesis, I address the ways the categories of "authentic," "fake," and replica are intertwined in the history of Western collecting of African art and its concomitant impact on the creation of art in Africa, particularly West Africa. By exploring the colonization of West Africa by Western (here defined as Europe and North America) nations, we can understand how the first objects from Africa stolen and removed by the British during the 1897 punitive raid on Benin, as well as objects taken by European anthropologists and "explorers" were instrumental in establishing an economic value of the objects sought and sold today. The sale and dissemination of those objects into museums helped to shape the way the first collectors conceptualized artifacts they took from Africa. This created a framework through which subsequent collectors and museums have collected and presented the work in the present. Today, museums and galleries, as well as private collectors, influence what is produced for the African tourist art market, thus affecting several facets: production, how objects are acquired, and the display of objects out of their original context. This is a question of supply and demand: the demand is for a particular notion of art, so artists supply what is desired.

There is a notion that "authentic" Africans do not exist anymore, therefore "authentic" African art does not either.[1] This idea is encouraged by museum displays of African objects next to prehistoric and extinct peoples' works, giving the viewer the assumption these African

[1] Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.

peopleno longer exist. Contemporary fakes and replicas are considered inauthentic versions of traditional forms. To be considered "authentic," it is assumed it must be from the pre-colonial era, untouched by Western influence.[2] Many museums are haunted by the fear of letting "fake" pieces come into their collection, removing the works if they are found to be fake.[3] The University of Northern Iowa (UNI) Museum does not intentionally avoid fakes or replicas because it is a teaching institution, collecting both examples of all types of pieces to educate students. These copies and replicas of antique works are still examples of African craftsmanship and, from a scholarly perspective, can be appreciated as such, discussed below.

Christopher Steiner offers a widely-accepted definition of "authenticity" in *African Arts in Transit*, used by many scholars in the field of African art.[4] Academics, dealers, and collectors use a definition of "authentic" that combines elements concerning the object's condition, history of use, intended audience, aesthetic merit, rarity, and estimated age. For example, a sculpture that is made by an artist in a primitive tribe and is destined for the use of this tribe in a ritual or functional way would be considered an "authentic" piece of African art. It has also been asserted that the artist making the object should have no thought of potential profit in a market intended for non-African consumption. Instead, it is asserted the artist should be creating out of necessity or as part of the tribe's long-standing traditions. Indigenous materials to the region should be used unless an outside material is needed for decoration, protection, or magic added to the object, and the object should function in accordance with the group's traditions. Regardless of age of the object, if it has not been used in a "traditional" manner, it is rendered "inauthentic" by Western evaluation.[5] There are several instances in which this is proven to be false, and authors like

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Joseph Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.
[4] Steiner, *African Art in Transit.*
[5] Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.

Christopher Steiner, Sidney L. Kasfir, Joseph Cornet, and Shelly Errington agree that perceived authenticity is not a true measure of quality, age, use, or value.[6] There is much discussion on the idea of authenticity, regarding how rigid the definition can be. Cornet writes,

> One might ask: what about an object made by an artist in one cultural group but used by members of another group? Or an object made by an artist following accepted cultural canons, but sold before it is actually used? Or an object made after independence by a traditional artist using traditional methods but poorly manufactured to satisfy a Western perception of African technology? Or an object made in a traditional form and material but with European iconography specifically for European consumption? Or an object that was neither made within a cultural group, nor of traditional materials but is used and revered in a traditional context? Or an object, whose form is Western but whose meaning has been transformed so that it becomes incorporated into a traditional culture? Or an object with clear cross-cultural attributes?[7]

There are too many scenarios that break the rules of "authenticity" to abide by this Western construct, it cannot exist in a vacuum. Social, economic, historical, and relational factors contribute to a faulty definition that fails to encompass the full picture.[8]

While Steiner provides a definition of "authenticity," authors like Cornet contribute to the ways in which "authenticity" is distinguished and perpetuated.[9] Steiner's contributions in the *In and Out of Africa* film give a firsthand view to the life of dealers, makers, private collectors, and

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[6]Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
Kasfir, African Art and the Colonial Encounter.
Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.
Errington, "The Death of Authentic Primitive Art," 118-36.
[7] Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.
[8] Stephen Mellor, "From Delicious to Not Quite Right: Subtleties in Discerning the Authenticity of African Art."
[9] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.

others part of the trade market.[10] Kasfir and Steiner illustrate a deep understanding of the trade market and exchange process, prompting readers to consider ethical dilemmas, further discussed by Brian Fagan.[11] Shelton argues that "authentic" and "fake" works be distinguished from one another purely in terms of monetary value between an antique and a new work.[12] John W. Monroe discusses the history of French and European collection, expanding the trade to what it has become today, as well as calling out how museums must do better curating displays that do not distance works from their original contexts.[13] Monica Udvardy et al. also contribute to how museums can be activists for the ethical collection and trade of African art.[14]

Errington catalogues the history of Western institutions displaying and labeling African, "primitive" art.[15] Her argument agrees with that of Shiner and Stephen Mellor, that "authentic, primitive" art is a Western construct.[16] Both Errington and Marianna Torgovnick outline how objects not originally made as art were then appropriated as art through praising the "primitive" qualities and their effect on Western artists, taking away from their value as independent African works.[17] Meg Lambert and Mary R. Martin both go in depth on repatriation and legal issues of collecting and acquiring African art, stating how museums have been bystanders for too long.[18] Museums must examine their collections and donors, holding themselves to a standard of transparency, ethical collection, and commitment to be educators of the complete histories their

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[10] *In and Out of Africa*.
[11] Kasfir, African Art and the Colonial Encounter.
Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
Messenger et al, The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property.
[12]Shelton, "Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery," 20.
[13] Monroe, Metropolitan Fetish.
[14] Udvardy et al. "The Transatlantic Trade in African Ancestors," 566-80.
[15]Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.
[16]Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes," 225.
Mellor, "From Delicious to Not Quite Right."
[17] Errington, "The Death of Authentic Primitive Art," 118-36.
Torgovnick, "Making Primitive Art High Art," 299.
[18]Meg Lambert, "Give and Take: US Museums' Attitudes and Ethics Toward the Acquisition and Repatriation of West African Cultural Artefacts."
Martin et al, "Legal Issues in African Art."

objects possess to the best of their abilities. Errington, author of *What Became Authentic Primitive Art,* states,

> "The idea that authentic Primitive Art consists of objects made by "untouched" cultures for their own uses rather than for sale to "outsiders" and that these objects are pure in their form and content, uncontaminated by Western influence … "Primitivism" has been exposed as a Western ideological construct."[19]

What used to be a categorization for African art and art of "undeveloped, uncivilized" countries, primitive is no longer an acceptable description. "Primitive" societies do not see themselves as simple or uncivilized, but rather they exist contently in a different cultural setting than the Western world. By calling out their "otherness," Western missionaries and colonizers have taken ideas of white saviorism and assimilation and spread them throughout Africa in an attempt to enrich and teach these "third-world primitives." Cornet agrees with the ideas of Errington's definition of authenticity, proposing,

> An object may be considered authentic when: it is created by a traditional artist; conforms to traditional forms, that is, exhibits meaningful canons that are recognized and accepted by individuals within a culture; and that it was created for a traditional purpose, or culturally used.[20]

Not every object labeled as both "authentic" and "Primitive" qualifies as art, but the ones that do are given an established monetary value and legitimacy. The museum process that selects some, but not most, objects to be considered art is dismantling. The vast majority of objects in fine art museums were not intended by their makers to be "art," but rather went through a metamorphosis to become "art," causing contemporary spectators and researchers to question if

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[19] Shelly Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.
[20] Ibid.

works were art by appropriation or art by intention. By adding works to a case, framing, or other museum display practices, these objects *become* "art."[21]

Making Primitive Art High Art by Torgovnick, offers similar critiques to Errington.

> Art in the museum age is not as isolated as works produced by creative genius, whose worth is certified by the very fact of exhibition in major galleries or museums, but as works displayed and exhibited by the staffs of museums and galleries, whose ideas of importance and worth will have been shaped by, and will in turn shape, other tastes, an audience, a canon.[22]

The first works that were brought from Africa to Europe have established a canon that is continually upheld and perpetuated by all parties involved with the African art market. Despite the continuation of African artists creating work, they are creating much different works than their predecessors did. Western critics like Monroe have written about "the disappearing arts," as aesthetic qualities within African art are described as steadily diminishing.[23] Veils of awareness worn by white tourists have been removed, and artists have responded with a desire to capitalize on their products. This was met with disapproval of artists intentionally seeking profits by catering to their white buyers. The idea of searching for "creativity untainted by commodification" gave birth to concepts of authenticity, which has proved to be more a figment of a Western imagination than African reality.[24]

Steiner describes how African dealers know the parameters around perceived authenticity and use specific language influenced according to the knowledge of Western taste.[25] Because of these perceptions, almost nothing on the market is sold as new, even if it is. Traders will say it is

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[21] Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.
[22] Torgovnick, Marianna, "Making Primitive Art High Art," 299.
[23] John Warne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art*.
[24] Ibid.
[25] *In and Out of Africa*. Royal Anthropological Institute, 1993.

"only a little old," point out artificial distress, or explain the usage of an object to a customer, without revealing the true age of the object.[26] Patina is often a sole indicator of authenticity or wear, even though it can easily and successfully be faked with oils, dirt, or other materials. Most fakes are naively made and the patina can be rubbed off, chemical colorings are used, and there are artificial termite holes. *Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art* by Marie-Denise Shelton, states, "New pieces carved by traditional artists in a traditional style are not fakes, no matter whom they are carved for. Potential buyers should be careful, however, that the sellers do not demand the price of a used piece."[27] Masks can even have artificial sweat and bite marks to convince buyers they were danced, adding to their value. Copies or "fakes" imitate traditional forms and are made to sell to outsiders, sometimes being marketed as replicas worth less, but sometimes making their way into the antique category depending on the buyer's naive knowledge of African art. Nyama-nyama is a category of objects known as tourist art that bear little to no relation to traditional art forms or cultures of the creator, but are made to satisfy the consumer, not please the artist, which the serious collectors of African art scoff at.[28]

Cornet, author of *African Art and Authenticity,* explains how many objects are made by artists who do not belong to the tribe the object originated from, as modern art education and schools have established a curriculum with practices of making these pieces.[29] Larry Shiner further explains, often workshops teach both those who will produce "fakes" and those who will carve for "traditional" use, learning the same skill sets.[30] "By making imitations faithful to the forms of the past, and artificially aging them in various ways, they try to situate these post-traditional objects in a long-gone epoch when artists were oriented differently within their

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[26] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
[27] Marie-Denise Shelton, "Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art," 20.
[28] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
[29] Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 52.
[30] Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes,"1994.

societal system if not in their style."[31]

Uniqueness and rarity is also implemented into the conversation of authenticity. Most objects on the art market are copies deriving from the first objects taken by the Europeans and housed in museums and books; essentially, there are originals, old copies, new copies, and replicas made for the tourist market.[32] Researchers and art historians are part of the canonical cycle by photographing and including pictures of African art objects, which African dealers then ask runners to find, steal, or replicate. Stated in a lecture by Steiner,

> Publications have become canonical models guiding formation of subsequent collections and thus creating a cycle for the reproduction of aesthetic ideals. The fact is, collectors of African art have rejected any form of contemporary African art because traditional art fits more comfortably with their stereotypes of a primitive culture.[33]

Tourist art made specifically for the market is not made with producing something new in mind, but it is copied from examples from books and catalogs to evoke a sense of familiarity and confirmation about stereotypes and ideas travelers seek to preserve from their trip to Africa. The point is not to expand the canon, but to regurgitate it, providing security in a world of rapid change, ie. high value collections. Should an artist dare stray from what is seen in these catalogs in an attempt to express their own creativity, it will be dubbed "inauthentic" by Western standards.

Steiner describes how this cycle has been created and continues to repeat itself, "First catalogs and exhibitions create a canon, and by recycling the canon, establish over time its' authority and "authenticity." Second, collectors and dealers perpetuate the canon by selecting objects that fit the criteria established in the catalogues and museums. Third, the repetition of

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[31] Cornet, "African Art and Authenticity," 225.
[32] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
[33] *The Invention of African Art - Jane Powell Dwyer Lecture*, *YouTube*, 2014.

collecting, selling and exhibiting ensures the styles preeminence within the canon as the system becomes mutually reinforcing from museum to gallery to private collection and back again. Finally, with each turn in the cycle, the economic value of the art increases on the auction block thereby ensuring its place in the canon as a result simply of its increased value."[34] Kasfir's article, "African Art in a Suitcase," highlights how market vendors are able to point out the similar mask or object in their stand to one in the book, validating the significance and value of the piece.[35] Books and catalogs document the standards of pieces visitors to Africa and collectors of African art seek to purchase.

There is a double standard with the definition of "authenticity." As stated by Larry Shiner, author of the article, "'Primitive Fakes,' 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity,'" Western artists are taught and expected to serve art, not profit from the market and fame, digging in to their spiritual motivations to make art. African artists, however, are more open about their dependence on the market as a motivation, as filling the demands is what has bred success. Only a few African artists who have been able to migrate to cities have learned this delicate balance of appearing motivated by the devotion to art, making smaller-scale workshops more vulnerable to Western critique.[36] Discussion of what the Western world has decided can be considered art or not has completely shaped the modern African art market production demand. By African artists deciding to make art for art's sake, it was labeled inauthentic and driven by profit.

"Authentic," "Primitive," art commands high prices at auctions in galleries as it is seen over and over again in museums. As museums were created in the nineteenth century to house bounty from expeditions, more objects were able to gain the status of art by being put on display. Pieces became transformed by displays, framing, and other practices enhancing their identity as

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Sidney L. Kasfir, and Christopher B. Steiner, "African Art in a Suitcase," *146.*
[36] Larry Shiner, ""Primitive Fakes," "Tourist Art," and the Ideology of Authenticity," 225-34.

"art." Objects that were easy to move and export from out of Africa often determined if they could be displayed or not. Works that were too small were insignificant and works too large were too expensive to transport and house. Portability by intent rose as people making impermanent art transitioned to more durable mediums and methods for transportation and display, increasing commodifiability.[37] Masks are prime examples of objects that shed their need to be performed to see their meaning. As stills, masks are inanimate and out of their intended context, while in reality, they are brought to life as extensions of the human wearing them.

The impact of colonialism and commodification on defining artists and artisans by Western standards also influenced the title the makers were given. Errington describes the ways art and craft have been categorized.

> Applied to the selection of non-Western objects, the distinction between high art and utilitarian craft tends to mean that obviously functional items (especially if they are undecorated) do not qualify as art … Objects used for ceremonial purposes are more likely to be regarded as transcendent, therefore making them into the category 'art.'[38]

There was a distinction between art and craft, which by European standard, is the level of risk in technical skill.[39] Pieces could qualify as art from their aesthetic colors and textures, entering into a commodity status. As stated by Errington,

> A decorated ritual object that has become High "Primitive" Art has two relevant qualities: its participation in the sacred and its formal plastic qualities … High Primitive Art stands to the rest of the market in primitive art more or less as Renaissance painting stands to the rest of the art market. It invented the category. It defines the genre. It

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[37] Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter.*

anchors the market.[40]

Colonization led to objects becoming desired and collected by outsiders as specimens of a "primitive society" and exchange value was established.[41] Steiner worked closely with the Western Africa trading community, mostly in Cote d'Ivoire and Abidjan markets, interacting with middlemen, contemporary artists/artisans, dealers, Western collectors, and tourists. He found that merchandise is evaluated based on Western concepts of art and authenticity and objects go through the world economic system but also function as an exchange of information regarding the cultural knowledge of the objects and their makers.[42]

Shiner shares that carvings not intended to be art were deemed "authentic" and those made specifically to be sold as art were seen as "fake," a mere commercial craft. It may be considered business fraud for a maker to sell a new piece at the same price as an old one to deceive the customer, but it does not make it any less real as it is still made by an African artisan. Replicas can still be appreciated as cultural objects without the label of authentic.

> Tourist art contains a special form of expressive symbolism. It is at once a statement about the identity of the artists and a commentary on the audience for which it is produced. Through the use of visual metaphors, tourist art represents the emotions of its makers, the group identity of the artists, and a bridge between cultures. It possesses both decorative motifs and an undertone of social commentary.[43]

It is the error of many art historians to see these works as a deviation from traditional form and use and not as a creative response to present cultural and economic realities of these societies.

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[40] Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.
[41] Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter.*
[42] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
[43] Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes,'" 225.

Background of the Art Trade and Evolution of the Tourist Market

The Portuguese, Italian, and Dutch had been in contact with Africans since at least the fifteenth century, trading cloth, gunpowder, beads, iron and more in exchange for gold, ivory, and African-made objects. Major developments occurred in the trade when European artists and intellectuals "discovered" African art, taking interest in its forms and aesthetics, creating a demand and market for the art objects to travel to Europe.[44] As travelers traded for more goods and exported them back to their home countries, collections were amassed with nowhere to go. It was then the invention of museums served the purpose of housing and displaying of these treasures from colonized Africa.

The modern European demand for African art and scramble for colonizing the African continent began in 1884 when fourteen countries sent representatives to attend the Berlin Conference and sign the subsequent Berlin Act: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Ottoman Empire, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, Britain, and the United States. There were no African representatives at the conference, despite its rhetoric emphasizing the benefit to Africa. Before the Berlin Conference, traders and explorers collected curios and souvenirs from their conquests, the first wave of collecting these kinds of objects. The second wave following this kind of collecting was a period of trophy collecting, where large collections of artifacts including weapons, animal skins, and tusks were taken as means of showing conquest and domination.[45]

In the nineteenth century, "savage fetishes" from African conquests made their way into European museums. Twentieth century artists like Picasso took inspiration from the "primitive" works and aesthetics, and private collectors began to acquire more of the minimal works for their

[44] Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit*
[45] Martin et al, "Legal Issues in African Art."

homes.[46] Picasso and the German Expressionists took interest in Primitivism, viewing African art at natural history museums and using the motifs to appropriate the "primitive" in their own works. As stated by Torgovnick,

> Primitives resemble children and neurotics, those who have not yet reached, or have been unable to remain in a state of full, satisfactory, normal, *European* adulthood … One should note that the idea of the primitive as undeveloped, as developing towards a Western norm, has always been implicit in the word and cannot simply be willed away by contemporary thinkers.[47]

The 1950s led to a change in the types of objects sold to Europe from "classic" items like masks and ritual items to other pieces like household/utilitarian items, furniture, textiles, and more to fit Western desires and style.[48] Stated by Martin,

> By the nineteenth century, some African artworks began to show European traits. For example, wooden figural groups with crucifixes made by the Kongo, and the asipim chair of the Asante (See Appendix A, Fig. 3), seem partially to reflect European aesthetic values, but also to retain their own local sense of cultural value. One cannot help but wonder if the artists incorporated western elements in part as a defense mechanism to save their work from being destroyed by the missionaries.[49]

Artificial aging, through manipulated patination, (or patina,) coloration, and surface wear were then intentionally added to make pieces appear antique and "authentic" to Western collectors.[50] The 1960s and 70s brought demand for African art from America through increased interest from the Peace Corps, civil rights movement, and mass tourism to West Africa. The

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[46]Mary Rhoads Martin, and Christopher D. Roy, "Legal Issues in African Art"
[47] Torgovnick, "Making Primitive Art High Art," 299.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Martin et al, "Legal Issues in African Art."
[50] Torgovnick, "Making Primitive Art High Art," 299.

market started to smolder the trade as buyers believed that examples of "genuine" African art had been taken out of Africa leaving a limited supply.[51] The recirculation of previously owned objects in the West was now raking in the money, resulting in yearly decrease in demand, diminishing supply, and an uncertain future for the new traders entering each year.

Western demand for African art has led to a variety of new ways to make money for locals in the trade. There are several levels of involvement, including sellers, artisans, runners, dealers into the realm of sale. Traders are often referred to as "runners" and are treated with a general disrespect by Westerners, dismissed as ignorant to what they are selling, including the aesthetic merit or ethnographic provenance of the objects. Compared to Western counterparts who go to Africa to buy the art, known as dealers, who are able to transform and appreciate the pieces in ways the runners "do not understand," there is a level of trust in dealers to not cheat buyers. Western collectors often feel they will be cheated when buying directly from a runner, potentially receiving a fake, or getting cheated in the object they receive or how much they paid. Western buyers may feel that they must search through many runners' inventory, searching for an "authentic" gem among the "junk" they usually sell.[52] African traders play off the idea that they "do not know the treasures they are selling" by tricking buyers into thinking there are treasures in the bottom of a pile, it is good for business to pretend to believe the buyer, while they know exactly what is going on. This system of exchange can take an outsider years to learn and understand, slowly learning the language, written, and unwritten rules of the trade; centering around ideas of authenticity.

African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity by Kasfir states that colonial encounters lead to recontextualization of objects as aesthetic art pieces, distancing

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

the pieces from their local histories. This created the problem of objects outlasting events for which they were originally intended (to be temporary), giving the object more complexity as it continues to exist past its initial appearance.[53] Made to last, hard material items were favored over ephemeral works. To make pieces more aesthetic and minimal, rafia and basketry were often removed from wood pieces to make them more sculptural. The removal of functional or decorative elements from pieces gradually came to be a practice disdained by active collectors of pieces viewed as being new or “original" to the market. The attachments were in ways more difficult to fake and their presence, depending on their quality, could support or repudiate the “authenticity” of the pieces being inspected and considered for purchase. National restrictions on the export of feathers from endangered birds or skins from selected animals complicated matters for collectors who looked upon attachments as another means to assess quality.

Ethics of Collection and Display

The perception of “primitive” art and seeing it as fuel for modernism skews our placement of the objects from their cultural context into part of Western cultural history. The objects become neutralized, simply aesthetic sculptures rather than representing social, economic, and religious experiences. When we lose interest in African objects’ individual histories, we lose sight of their original functions and artistry, focusing on how they have affected Western artists' motifs. Museum classifications of objects do not usually align with the original makers and owners classifications. The cultural script is changed when objects are translated by viewers in museums, who do not share the same cultural assumptions and beliefs as the artist. Art’s power may lie in “taking your breath away” to the Western world, but to the African maker, the power may lie in “it works and performs its function.”[54]

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[53] Sidney L. Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter: Inventing a Global Commodity*.
[54]Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter.*

Museums have placed “primitive art” of still-existing cultures near or in the same exhibit as prehistoric and past societies, implying that the peoples who made it are no longer around.[55] Museums often refer to present day, living tribespeople in the past tense in written labels. Objects are removed from their cultures and placed under plexiglass for Western contemplation, often with no cultural context.[56] African art symbols are not understood outside of their original community and become naked and vulnerable to the interpretations and significance of the world of the viewer, defenseless under a glass case, creating misinterpretations abound in symbolism.[57] When objects lose their surface visibility, the understanding of the symbolic representations they hold can easily become a souvenir purely as a placeholder for memory of place, remembering and objectifying wrongfully. Patronage from the British led to expectations of what a souvenir consisted of. Sizes, styles, and technical specifications were expanded as a response to demand.[58] By seeing these works as done by artists of less intelligence or skill, it degrades the true artistic choices and cultural relevance of their works, perpetuating the idea with contemporary African artists and discrediting their work as less sophisticated.

It is important to know that many objects were not just created for local use but were borrowed and traded among ethnic groups in a wider geographic range, crosscutting ethnic “boundaries.”[59] Mislabeling from one party does not imply intended use, but it is often represented as such in Western museums. When objects are displayed out of context, it becomes problematic to ask how they were acquired from their original place, often due to profitable coercion. Steiner discusses at length, “As a means of diverting local outrage, village elders who are forced, by economic need, to sell sacred goods to traders often report to their community that

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[55]Shiner, “‘Primitive Fakes," 225.
[56]Ibid.
[57] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
[58]Kasfir, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter.*
[59] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.

the pieces were stolen by the traders."[60] Transit and transition of the object are both relevant to understanding the complete object history from place of origin. From transit to commercial spaces, cultural values from two places are interpreted and assigned to the object.[61]

Extraction of objects from villages could be seen as unethical, as it involves runners going into villages and looking for objects that are not commodified to transfer to the art market. Owners of these artworks or household objects often sell based on a use-value, while the buyer may evaluate based on exchange-value. Coming to a compromise is the goal. Often objects may be true antiques or passed down through family lines; owners may feel deeply attached to them, but some may become convinced to sell them. Some objects hold too much cultural value to sell, like lip plugs and bracelets. Owners deem these types of objects priceless and won't sell, prompting buyers to desire them so intensely, occasionally leading to theft. The people who owned these objects attached value in their cultural context, but dealers found the objects' value in the context of the economic world.[62] Not everything is meant to survive in a museum, for example, African Boli figures made of soil and other organic materials. According to Steiner, some West African natives had a mentality of not wishing for money for their objects to be collected as they would rather have them break down and return to the earth.[63]

A turbulent political climate affects laws and ethical norms and is reflected in how African art has been perceived throughout history. While there is a continuously growing body of international and national legislation protecting cultural property, African art has not distanced itself from the classification of commodities. Western cultures may have no issue stealing, illegally exporting, importing, foraging, destroying, or censoring African art.[64] As discussed by

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Martin et al, "Legal Issues in African Art."

Martin and Roy,

> England's demonstration of African art and culture was a means of declaring its own colonial clout .. [it is not outlined] how laws and the art world interact, and how one can infer colonial agenda from how the law was manipulated to advance a political agenda. Art, of course, was a pawn in the political game.[65]

Within a Western, patriarchal framework, justification of the treatment of women and oppressed individuals are viewed as feelings of superiority and dominance.[66] By viewing the world and oppressed countries as lesser, the Western world does not feel guilt for robbing the treasures, feeling they are in fact protecting them or making them more accessible by putting them on display.

> Although awareness of, and interest in, African art greatly increased towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was still largely considered a primitive product of an inferior culture. For this reason it was seen only in ethnological museums for the most part, and not knowing the artworks' context and meaning, museums grouped like objects together more like trophies in a case than art to be appreciated and viewed. The fact that cultural objects from Africa were not really considered art makes it understandable that there were no laws to protect it from being taken away from its source nation.[67]

There are still evident damages of the cultural piracy that took place in the nineteenth century, and due to the difficulty in disentangling the origin of objects, it is unclear where many objects came from or who should have them now. And, should they be repatriated?.

"Objects originally placed in today's "encyclopedic" museums were removed from the

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Phyllis Mauch Messenger and Brian M. Fagan, *The Ethics of Collecting Cultural Property: Whose Culture? Whose Property?*
[67] Martin et al, "Legal Issues in African Art."

source countries with some sort of permission or a partage agreement. These agreements were often legal, but in practice, many works were acquired from deceit that was not that much different from pure looting."[68]

One of the most notable removals was the 1897 WWII British expedition, where several hundred objects were looted from the Kingdom of Benin, what is present day Nigeria. Today, museum leaders are faced with repatriating objects or, if they were illegally or unethically acquired, risking the criticism or disdain of patrons, ethicists, and politicians.

The role of the museum in encouraging ethical, legal trade practices is implicated, and significant responsibility is placed on museums and government to make this happen. Udvardy, Giles, and Mitsanze detail recommended ways for Western museums to stop the extraction of goods out of Africa, "Tightening legal loopholes, strengthening observance of international agreements and the U.S. and international museums' code of ethics, stepping up field efforts to deter theft, and educating the public about this growing trade."[69] Objects are bought for less than $100 in Africa and sold for $1,000 to $100,000+ in Western societies. Artists, collectors, dealers, philanthropists, museum personnel, and related academics bestow the power of deciding which pieces of African works hold the status of art, thus increasing their worth. Museums often receive collections from private collectors, who may have acquired the pieces unethically by theft, unfair compensation, pressuring to sell, and through dishonest government exporting by corrupt leaders in Africa countries. Therefore, it is the ethical responsibility of museum personnel to be more proactive in deterring destructive effects of dealers and collectors of African objects. Many museum professionals choose to maintain silence around the objects'

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Monica L. Udvardy, Linda L. Giles, and John B. Mitsanze, "The Transatlantic Trade in African Ancestors: Mijikenda Memorial Statues (Vigango) and the Ethics of Collecting and Curating Non-Western Cultural Property," 566-80.

histories, as they do not always have the complete narrative.[70]

UNI Museum Objects and their Provenance

The UNI Museum has received numerous pieces in the African Art collection from Dr. William Blair, a private collector out of Iowa City. I asked him a series of questions pertaining to his motivations for collecting African Art as well as to gain understanding on his history of involvement in the trade market. The purpose of this interview was to test my theories of research on "authenticity," Western encounters, and ethics of collecting and displaying these objects. It is necessary to know the narratives of why objects were collected and under what circumstances to add to the history of the objects. Blair was collecting in the 1980's and 1990's, often acquiring works out of the back of a dealer's van that would come through Iowa City.

Dr. Blair provided an honest look at the motivations behind collecting this type of art. He told me that he had no interest in visiting Africa, despite having a decades long interest in collecting numerous valuable pieces of African art. From my research, it was shown that many collectors and others have an idea of an untouched, primitive Africa that they do not want to ruin by visiting the real, modern-day Africa. It was also insightful to understand that in the time of collection, ethics of how these objects were acquired was not of high importance. This is a relatively recent concern of museums and collectors, further adding to the history and provenance of objects as well as potential for repatriation and justice. This interview provided an extremely beneficial and educational scope of why Dr. Blair was motivated to collect African Art. The integrity of the UNI Museum collection is very important, and it is through discussions like this that are honest that learning opportunities are broadened for both the researcher and the interviewee.

I chose to highlight several comparisons of authentic, "fake," and replicated works in my

[70] Ibid.

exhibition, “Art by Intention: Art by Appropriation. This Dan mask in the UNI Museum is an example of an authentic object. (see Appendix A, figure 5) It includes non-native salvaged aircraft aluminum around the eyes. There is native repaired raffia not original to the first carving. This repair would render this mask “inauthentic” by some definitions, as it is not original to the piece. The raffia and mask have been discolored by smoke from being stored in rafters, a sign of genuine usage, easily identifiable through smell and feel.

The UNI museum also holds several “fake” and replica masks. This tourist market mask (See Appendix A, Fig. 4) is an example of intentional imitation, mass produced for the tourist market. The raffia is not original and has no signs of usage such as smoke discoloration or odor from being stored in rafters, unlike the Dan mask. This object was made by an African carver, but can not be considered authentic by Western definitions. These piece are examples of the discrepancies that can arise by adhering to the categorization of authentic and its subjectivity.

Conclusion

By surveying the history of research on African art, the tourist trade market, and the handling of objects by both collectors and museums, it can be concluded the systems that created the realm of the African art trade are extremely complex. Each aspect from transit to display of the objects adds to the history of the piece. As political systems change worldwide, outdated views of Africa and its people are erased, replaced by the contemporary vision of artists catering to the Western world. By understanding the definition of “authenticity” used by Steiner and others in the field of African art, an understanding of the perpetuated and recirculated canon reveals itself.[71]

Before colonization in Africa, locals made utilitarian objects, traditional usage objects, sacred ritual objects, and other works. When Europeans colonized Africa, they acquired these

[71] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, 1994.

works as gifts, trades, and sometimes from theft, placing them in ethnographic museums for others to see the treasures of Africa. By removing objects from their cultural contexts and placing them behind a glass display to be observed, these objects lost their historical and cultural meanings, reduced to a "primitive aesthetic." When African people started to understand their works were being sold as art, they wanted to participate, creating pieces specifically to sell on a market. However, Western buyers were more interested in pre-colonial, "authentic," untouched, African objects that would be considered art upon their standards. Art made by intention was "inauthentic;" art made by being appropriated as art was "authentic."

This awareness created the canon of the modern day African art trade market. As pieces were removed out of Africa in the nineteenth century and placed in museums and books, a market value was established, and pieces became sought after by private collectors, museums, and artists. This created a demand for a supply of antique pre-colonial pieces, which began to diminish as collections grew. As the trade grew, African artists began to make copies and replicas of objects, claiming they were antique and "authentic," as this is where the value lied. As "fakes" were introduced to the market, artisans who were carving sculptures, masks, and other works to cater to Western buyers' needs found themselves being scrutinized as nothing more than imitating their ancestors' craft. This raises questions of the appreciation for contemporary African art and the detrimental affects the fear of fakery has caused for African art makers trying to make a living and fill the hole of demand.

As demands grew for "authentic" works, the ways pieces that were acquired became more unethical and illegal. Some of the first objects taken from Africa were looted in colonial expeditions and are presently being asked to be repatriated.[72] Who owns cultural property and

[72] Meg Lambert, "Give and Take: US Museums' Attitudes and Ethics Toward the Acquisition and Repatriation of West African Cultural Artefacts."

how it is treated by the Western world can be observed through the study of the history of African art. Museums are presently being asked to be transparent around their objects' histories, sometimes unknown, and to educate on the complex histories of African art. Ethical collection and display of African art is a fairly recent concern, as the boom of collecting in the 1980's and 90's was focused on collecting based on aesthetic value, paying little to no attention to the acquisition history. Donor Dr. Blair illustrates this philosophy and the eventuality of wondering about his collection, stating that he will never know the complete acquisition histories of the respective objects.

Today, museums and galleries are tasked with balancing the display and collection of African objects. Cultivating exhibits and displays that place the object in an original context, giving more background than just a label, is extremely important to educating the public on the history of Africa. Language and terminology used in these exhibits and labels have been outdated for far too long, treating present-day African tribes as people of the past, or using outdated terms like "primitive" and "third-world" as well as being rigid around the definitions of "authenticity."

Not only do authors Steiner, Kasfir, Shiner, Errington, and others argue that "authenticity" should not determine African art's value, but it is argued that the vision of an untouched, pre-colonial Africa is more of a Western fantasy than a true reality.[73] The authors included in this research provide calls to action for the future of collection and display, urging readers to understand the perceived idea of "authenticity" and the true Western influences that have shaped the present-day African art market. Not only do I have a better understanding of the

[73] Steiner, *African Art in Transit*.
Kasfir and Steiner, "African Art in a Suitcase," 146.
Shiner, "'Primitive Fakes," 225.
Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" 201-26.

canon of African art, I am aware of the ways Africans have been cheated out of money, respect, and recognition they deserve for the works they produce. It is the responsibility of museums and international policy changes to enforce legal, ethical acquisition of African art and repatriation of stolen works as requested. Political shifts and unrest in African governments have allowed for objects to be illegally sold or stolen out of countries. Antique pieces passed down family lines may come out of the shadows as unrest rises, potentially being sold into the market legally, but unethically as Africans may sell in desperation for money to live. The implications of the Western grip on the trade are large and will take serious action to uproot and change.

The labels of "authentic" and "fake" should not determine the worth or value of African art. Even by first determining if pieces are faked copies or replicas of originals, they are still pieces of art made by authentic Africans and should be able to be sold with transparent descriptions. Antique pieces, new faked copies, and replicas should be worth different cultural and monetary amounts. Traditional use should not determine the authenticity or worth, as that continues to influence the value of work made purely to sell as art on the market. Artists choose to make work for the market as they know it is possible to profit from, whereas new, unique works may not attract buyers the same way. By categorizing works into art by intention and art by appropriation, we can further investigate the origins of the labels "authentic" and "fake."

Being able to have access to a collection of African art and the ability to produce research substantial enough to inform an exhibit was extremely fortunate. Selection of objects was carefully considered to what kinds of objects could form a dialog with each other and with viewers. A variety of "authentic" and "fake" replicas were chosen, pieces made specifically to be sold on the art market, as well as objects intended for utilitarian purposes that later became considered art. Photos of objects that have a questionable acquisition history were also included.

Lastly, one way museums can contribute to a better exhibition of African art is showing objects as they would have been used, alive and in motion and paired with objects that form a narrative or story, rather than stagnant and out of context. The exhibition I curated accomplishes this by including video clips of similar objects being used by native Africans as well as writing provocative labels that help viewers consider their stance on this research.

By pulling together the background of the trade and history of Western encounters and influence, we can further understand how "authenticity" arose and the canon was shaped, continually recycling works from some of the first expeditions, reaching higher and higher auction values and establishing the trade market further. As present-day African makers are catering their works to Western buyers, they are continually told their work is nothing but "fake" copies, despite being well-made in time and resources. As long as the Western world continues to collect African art while distancing it from the modern, civilized Africa that exists now, the ideas associating the Western fantasy of "authenticity" will prevail, shaping museum collections and demand. It is the role of collecting institutions to examine their own collection practices, categorization, and methods of display and labeling that can contribute to harmful, oppressive stereotypes about modern day Africans.

Appendix A

Fig. 1

Object List

Fig. 2

Ceremonial Stool, Early 20th Century
Luba
Gift of William F. Blair
2017-26-5

Originally carved as a stool for the chief to sit on and demonstrate his power, this is an example of an "authentic" object. As the tourist market replicated these stools, they became smaller, the finish was less refined, and the wood became lighter making them more appealing and easier to transport by Western buyers.

Fig. 3

Chair/Stool, ca 1971
Baule or Ashanti
Gift of Katherine Koob
2009.2.24

Stools were originally created as a way to demonstrate the power of royalty. Over time, styles were altered to imitate western design such as incorporating backs and giving them more of a recognizable structure. This Westernization of the design was done to elevate the status of those who utilized it. Elements of the original Luba stools are still evident such as the carved birds and scarification marks.

Fig. 4

Tourist Market Mask, Mid 20th Century
Central Africa/ Balese/Bira/Democratic Republic of Congo
Gift of William F. Blair
2013.2.3

This mask is an example of an intentional imitation, mass produced for the tourist market. The raffia is not original and has no signs of usage such as smoke discoloration from being stored in rafters. This object was made by an African carver, but can not be considered authentic by Western definitions.

Fig. 5

Dan mask, Early 20th Century
Dan
Gift of William F. Blair
2014-4-3

This mask includes non-native salvaged aircraft aluminium around the eyes. There is native repaired raffia not original to the first carving. This repair would not be considered original by some definitions of authentic.The raffia and mask have been discolored by smoke from being stored in rafters, a sign of genuine usage and easily identifiable through smell and feel.

Fig 6

Replica Tourist Market Mask, 1900-1968
Sierra Leone
1968.10.0055

This mask was made as a replica for the tourist market. The back of the mask shows a low quality carving technique and an example of a quickly faked patina typical of mass produced pieces.

Fig. 7

Door latch, Early 20th Century
Dogon
Gift of William F. Blair
2006.13.7

Door locks such as this Dogon example were used on granaries, a storehouse for grain and animal feed, representing the heart and vitality of the community. When discovered by colonists, the object's definition was redefined as fine art, by appropriation. Concepts of value have directly influenced the idea of what objects are worth both monetarily and culturally in museums today.

Fig. 8

Contemporary door lock, early 21st Century

In 100 years will this lock define who we are as a society in a fine art gallery?

Fig. 9

Toy Bike, 1972-1978
Zambia
Gift of Katherine Koob
2010.4.18

This toy was made by a child for the tourist market, rendering it "inauthentic" as it is not pre-colonial or made without intent to sell. The presence of rubber indicates the recycling of car tires, whose arrival was due to Western colonization in the Congo where rubber was naturally sourced. Selling this piece would provide an income for the child's family, supporting local economies. Pieces like this don't follow the traditional definition of "authentic" and are harder to sell since modern cultural objects are less sought after by collectors and museums. Rather, they highlight the creativity and resourcefulness of contemporary African artists.

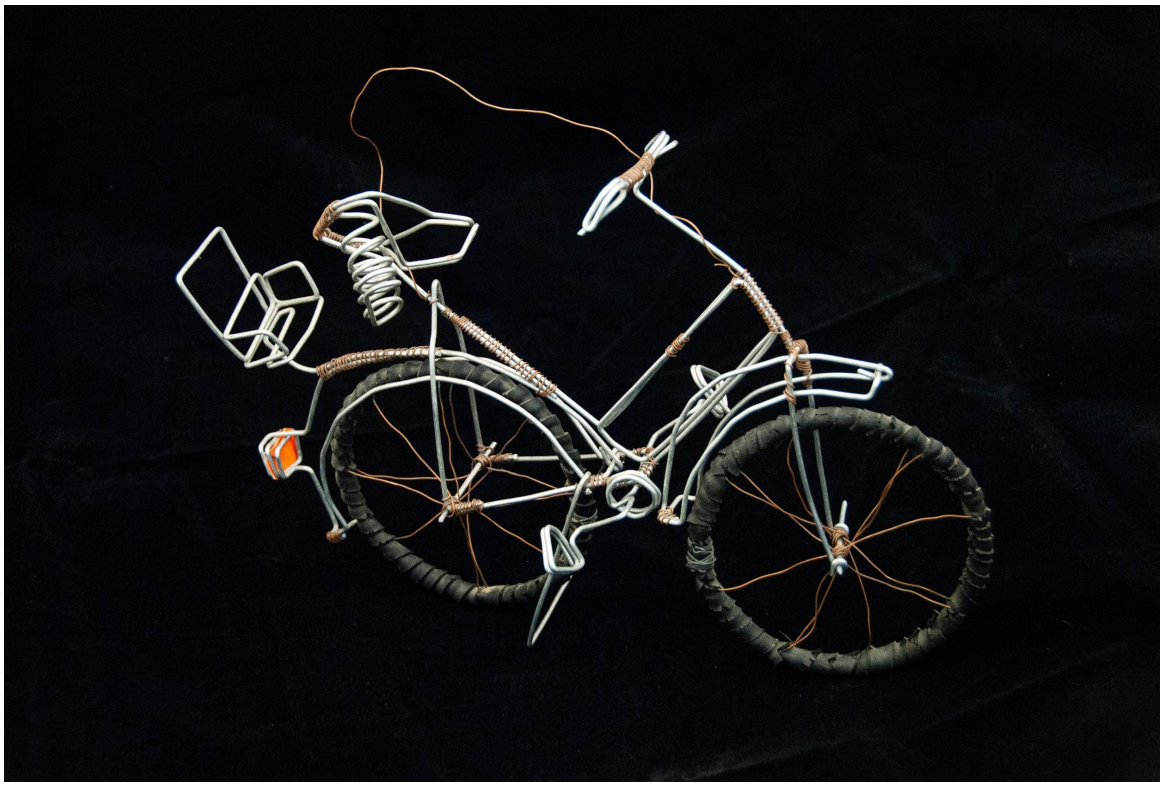

Fig. 10

An interview with the donor: Bill Blair

What drew you to the pieces you collected?

"The primary attraction was an aesthetic sense. It's a cliche, but I felt that pieces were speaking to me, that I could relate to them. Secondly, I was concerned with authenticity. I searched for and strive to collect things that I considered to be "authentic", made by Africans for their cultural and traditional uses, made by artists who had an appreciation for their craft. My intention early on was for the collection to only be authentic pieces. I began collecting by considering my academic interests and interests in aesthetics of 'Primitive' works. I was not interested in collecting anything we would consider today as contemporary. I did ultimately want to have a collection that looked at African art somewhat broadly, collecting pieces from all over the African continent."

Regarding ethical collection practices and object history:

"The history of the objects was hidden or concealed most of the time. You could not get an accurate story or any story at all. At the time (the 80's and 90's), [the ethics of collecting] was not of major importance to me, as I was interested in the aesthetics. As time went by, that became a concern of mine. I was aware pieces were being stolen, confiscated, or acquired by illegal or unethical means. I was aware that some of the dealers were acquiring pieces in a way that was legitimate, but without the seller's knowledge of what the pieces would be worth once they were transported into the Western market. I think people were being taken advantage of. My other concern was the increasing sophistication in fakery. Earlier on it was easier to identify, but as time went on, as I had a sense for pieces that had a presence, sometimes they would not look right or feel right, and it became more difficult to tell the difference between authentic and fake."

Dr. William Blair of Iowa City donated numerous items to our UNI African Art collection. He was willing to answer questions regarding his motivations to collect as well as his own personal criteria for collection.

Book Bistro Case:

Fig. 11

Object List

Fig. 12

Replica Benin Bronze, 1900-1968
West Africa
1968.10.1

Fig. 13

Replica Benin Bronze, 1900-1968
West Africa
1968.10.2

Fig. 14

Replica Benin Bronze, 1900-1968
West Africa
1968.10.53

Fig. 15

Map of the Kingdom of Benin, what is now Present-day Nigeria, Photo Courtesy of Roberta Fallon

Fig. 16

Authentic Benin Bronze Sculptures, Photo Courtesy of Jacque Mart

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